

*Sisters and Brothers*

A Sermon on 1 Corinthians 13 and Mark 12:28-34 by the Rev. Philip Major

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I begin with two more or less controversial statements that are at the heart of our faith. First, the one who made us created each one of us in the image of God. Second, as we were all created in the image of God, by the one God, we are all sisters and brothers of each other.

My sister and I are not the same. In fact, except for the fact that we share the same set of parents and we are both classical musicians, my sister and I have almost nothing in common. My sister and I are not the same, yet we will always be connected by the fact that we are brother and sister. The fact that we are brother and sister to each other is a fact that can never be taken away from us.

The same is true for all of us here today. We are brothers and sisters. We hold onto this as the central reality of our lives. We must never let ourselves be deceived into thinking we are not eternally connected to each other.

Let's think about the connection that binds us as brothers and sisters from the perspective of the two Jewish men who are at the center of what we do in this place. The first Jewish man at the center of our story is Jesus.

People have many different ideas about Jesus but it seems everyone agrees Jesus was extremely familiar with Torah, that is with the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The Hebrew scriptures were Jesus' scriptures. Another Jewish man asked Jesus which commandment was the first. They are not talking about the group of commandments we call the ten commandments. There was an understanding between them that they are considering which of the 613 mitzvot, or 613 commandments, is the greatest of all.

Jesus responds with these words from the book of Deuteronomy: *'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'* Many of us might be impressed that Jesus could quote these two verses from Deuteronomy. Our Jewish brothers and sisters might remind us that the first of these verses is also known as The Shema, one of the most important prayers in Judaism, which, of course, was the faith of Jesus. Many observant Jews say this verse as a prayer before they go to sleep. These verses and the next several verses from Deuteronomy are at the center of the Jewish morning and evening prayer services, so Jesus probably heard and recited this verse many times each week.

It seems quite characteristic of Jesus to go beyond the simple answer to the question. The scribe asked which commandment is the first. Jesus replies, there is a first but the first one must go with a second commandment that is its equal in greatness. Jesus chose a commandment from the book of Leviticus, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." For Jesus love of God and love of our neighbors are equally important. It is more than that, for Jesus love of God is directly connected to love of our neighbors. For Jesus, holiness is directly connected to our behavior towards our neighbors.

This is a thoroughly Jewish perspective. Jesus was not the first person to articulate this Jewish perspective. Jesus inherited this tradition from the prophets of Israel. 800 years before Jesus' time the prophet Amos insisted that for the God of Israel, worship brings us no closer to God if we are not treating our neighbors with generosity and kindness. In the book of Amos God utterly rejects any idea of holiness that does not include ethical treatment of our neighbors. In the words of the prophet, God says, "I hate, I despise your festivals and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies .... but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream."

This is the heart of Jesus teaching. It was the heart of the teaching of the Hebrew prophets. If you seek to love God you must also seek to love your neighbor. This truth is the heart of Christian faith; we received this teaching from our Jewish forebearers. Through this we are eternally connected with each other.

Through his actions Jesus brought the central teachings of Judaism, the necessity for us to love all of our neighbors, the necessity of caring for the foreigner and the stranger in our midst, to the gentiles. But it was St. Paul who fully described God's intention that all people follow this way of love originally described in the Hebrew scriptures.

Paul was fully human and prone to exaggeration, just like the rest of us. Most of Paul's letters are exactly that, letters written to one group of people in one place and time. Sometimes Paul gets a little carried away in making his arguments.

But Paul's letter to the Romans is in a slightly different category. It is more of a treatise, carefully thought out and attempting to correct some of the more outlandish statements Paul has made in his other letters. In Romans chapter 1 Paul lays out his central thesis about the relationship of the faith of the Jews to a new group of people who are not Jewish but who are following Christ. He writes, *the Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, for the Jew first, then also for the Gentile*. For the Jew first, then for the non-Jews.

For the past eight or ten or twelve centuries we have been surrounded by false interpretations of Paul. Paul's writings were often used by Christians as fuel to persecute Paul's own people. But that anti-semitism was our anti-semitism, not Paul's. Paul understands the central message of the Gospel is that God's salvation is for the Jews and for those who follow Christ.

The traditional view was that Paul was the founder of Christianity. The traditional view was that Paul was born Jewish but experienced a sudden and dramatic conversion away from Judaism to Christianity. The traditional view was that Paul was preaching a gospel message that superseded Jewish teaching.

I disagree and so do most 21st century interpreters of Paul's writings. Krister Stendahl may have been one of the first person to accurately describe Paul's experience on the road to Damascus as a calling from God, not a conversion. Paul was called to a special mission as a devout Jewish man. In the words of Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul lived and died as a Jew. ... As a Jew, Paul believed himself to be entrusted with the special knowledge God had given only to Jews. However, Paul also believed the resurrection of Jesus signaled that ... it was time to reconcile non-Jews to God.* (P. 4, 5)

This is what Paul was trying to do in the letter we call first Corinthians. In our reading from first Corinthians Paul is trying to introduce his audience, who are mostly gentile followers of Christ, to this central concept of his Jewish faith, which is that God calls us to love one another.

God's intention is for all of us, Jews and non-Jewish believers, to be brothers and sisters. This is the vision of Paul and of Jesus. It was Paul's vision that Jews like him, would always be Jews, that they would always be the first people to receive God's salvation, but it was also Paul's vision that, through the work of Christ Jesus, God reaches out to all of God's children, inviting them to receive salvation.

Acting out of fear or ignorance, some people will try to divide us from one another. This is not what God wants for us. God created each one of us in the image of God. God intends for us to be sisters and brothers.

